
UNIT 8 AGEING

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Learning Objectives

After having read this unit, you will be able to:

- define ageing;
- understand various approaches to the study of ageing;
- deliberate on the various social theories on ageing;
- reflect on the anthropological approach to ageing; and

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Ageing can be defined as “a process whereby people accumulate years and progressively experience changes to their biological, social and psychological functioning as they move through different phases of the life course” (Phillips et al. 2010: 12). Studying the process of ageing is a much-specialised field of enquiry and technically in academic jargon, such a study is labelled as ‘gerontology’. Gerontology can be defined as the study of ageing from three different perspectives- biological, psychological and social. Since gerontology is defined as the study of ageing from different perspectives, therefore it is a multidisciplinary subject that is informed by biological sciences, social sciences and psychology. The discipline of anthropology owing to its holistic understanding of human beings is best suited for a subject like gerontology. Eric Wolf once defined anthropology as “less a subject matter than a bond between subject matters”. This suggests that for a holistic understanding of human beings various dimensions needs to be taken into account that form an integral part of human life. In this very basic sense gerontological and anthropological interests coincide with each other. Franz Boas who is regarded as the father of American anthropology defined the scope of anthropology and projected it as a discipline that includes biological, cultural, linguistic and archaeological studies of particular groups of people. Multi-dimensionality

being at the core of anthropology makes it suitable for the study of ageing. An anthropologist would be interested in understanding the biological, social, cultural and archaeological dimensions of ageing.

Gerontology is also associated with geriatric medicine. It is a much specialised field which caters to the need of old people in an institutionalised setting. It is related with diagnosis, treatment, prevention and holistic care of older people who are suffering from some kind of physical and mental disorders. Historically if we try to trace the emergence of gerontology and an interest in understanding and studying 'age' as a group then we might have to go back to the seventeenth century when for the first time age related statistics on mortality and morbidity were recorded (Thane 2005). As is the case with most of the modern disciplines, by nineteenth century, study and research on old age started crystallising. However, it was only in 1903 (early twentieth century) that a Russian-born biologist named Elie Metchnikoff for the first time proposed and named a separate field of study called gerontology (Phillips et al 2010). In 1908, Metchnikoff, for the first time, used the word 'gerontology' in his book *The Prolongation of Life* (Victor 2005). "Whereas before the Second World War there was a concentration on paediatric care, by the end of the war there had been a greater recognition of the social and medical implications of an ageing population as well as an awareness of the low level of care for older people" (Phillips et al. 2010: 118).

As has been mentioned above gerontology is a multi-disciplinary science, there are largely three broad perspectives on ageing- biological, psychological and social. Engel in 1977 advanced the bio-socio-psycho model of ageing. This model tries to understand ageing from a holistic point of view. That is to say, that to grasp the problems and issues related to ageing an integrated approach like the bio-socio-psycho model is needed.

8.1.1 Biological Perspective

The biological perspective on ageing is concerned with the physiological and physical changes that accompany ageing. It is concerned with how with the passage of time physical appearance and physiological systems change. "Biologists refer to ageing as 'senescence'. This describes decreases in the efficient functioning of an organism with age as a result of natural processes rather than abnormal processes which bring about pathology and disease" (Victor 2005: 2). "Strehler (1962) defines ageing as the changes which occur in the post-reproductive phase of life that result from a decrease in the ability of the body to maintain homeostasis, that is to regulate the functions of the body within the very precise limits required for efficient functioning and survival" (Victor 2005: 2). The process of ageing makes the human body more susceptible to disease and pathology. Ageing from the biological perspective is seen as an involuntary process that is bound to happen and that decreases the adaptive capacities of people. It is a fact that there are other biological processes that are a result of various diseases and pathology and that may bring about a decrease and decline in the functioning of various organs and physiological systems of human beings but that will not amount to ageing as it has been described as an involuntary process. It is also true however that with increasing age people tend to become more susceptible to various diseases and pathology. It is in this context that Strehler (1962) has suggested four criteria that must be fulfilled in order to define a process and condition as part of ageing process. Any condition that fulfils these four criterions will be regarded as part of ageing. These are universality, internality, progressiveness and harmfulness. These four criterions

distinguish ageing from other biological processes that induce various kinds of changes in human body similar to the one defined as ageing. Let us examine what these criteria exactly mean:

1. **Universality**- A process will be considered as a part of ageing only when it is universal in its influence. This means that every member of the society must experience that at some point in his/ her life. For example it is now established that certain medical conditions start their appearance with advancing age. Prostate cancer (in men), lung cancer, loss of memory, etc. are such conditions. However they are not a part of ageing as they are not universal. They do not occur in every member of the society.
2. **Internality**- The process of ageing is internal to an organism/ individual. A process to qualify as ageing should not be induced from outside the individual as through radiations or other environmental hazards but should be initiated from within. Changes in the functioning of the body that are triggered due to smoking, chewing tobacco and drinking alcohol do not correspond to ageing as they are induced by external sources and thus do not qualify the criterion of internality.
3. **Progressiveness**- The process of ageing is slow and gradual. It is not a sudden or acute change but a progressive and cumulative change.
4. **Harmfulness**- Changes associated with ageing are harmful and they negatively affect the resilience and coping capabilities of the individual with respect to their environment. Such harmful changes ultimately lead to death of an individual.

From the very beginning one has to be very clear that there is a difference between ageing and old age. Where ageing is a process, old age is a stage of human development. However, it is also a fact that most of the studies and researches that are labeled and grouped under ageing studies are related to the studies undertaken on elderly people. This however does not mean that when we talk about ageing we are only referring to people belonging to a particular stage named as old age or elderly. For understanding the process of ageing we must appreciate the fact that human biology that includes physical appearance and physiological processes is not static. We change continuously as an individual biological being. However, such changes can be largely grouped under two headings- progressive and degenerating. Changes that are associated with early part of our lives are progressive in nature where we grow in size and shape and our physiological systems acquire maturity and functionality. The process of ageing however is associated with changes that take place later in our lives wherein degeneration sets in and physiological functioning slowly starts declining. It is very difficult to state that exactly when ageing starts as different people experience the signs of ageing at different periods of time but roughly the process of ageing starts from the later phase of early adulthood that is a period that extends from 18 years of age to 40 years. The first sign of ageing that appears in early adulthood is weight gain. This is largely associated with the slowing of the metabolic rate. Another important marker of ageing during this period is the graying of the hair. People start experiencing protruding abdomens and grey hair. The first signs of ageing therefore are related to the physical appearances of people. The ageing process starts changing the way we look. The process continues in the middle age that is the period between 40 and 60 years of age. During this period there is a gradual deterioration in the sensory abilities of people. Marked changes are seen in the functioning of eyes and ears during this period. This is also an age where changes are visible in the physiological functioning. Most of the middle-aged people suffer from

increased blood pressure. Middle age in women is marked by menopause. Then there are changes in the muscular structures, joints and teeth. Middle age is followed by old age that begins at 60 and extends till the individual dies. It can be said that ageing as a process extends from early adulthood to old age.

8.1.2 Psychological Perspective

The psychological perspective on ageing is associated with the notion of self and identity with increasing age and other physiological and physical changes that accompany ageing. This perspective also deals with the cognitive dimensions of ageing and changes that occur in the mental/ cognitive capabilities of individuals with advancing age. Within this perspective, two issues remain at the center of analysis and study viz. (a) differences of self, identity and cognitive functioning between individuals and (b) differences within the individuals that is examined with respect to the advancing age and related changes. Since psychology is defined as the science of mind and human behaviour, the psychological perspective on ageing largely deals with cognition and human behaviour during the old age.

It is a widely held belief that with advancing age cognitive functioning is on a decline. However, it remains a matter of contention and debate that what accounts for 'cognitive functioning'. Cognitive function is a multidimensional concept. It is made-up of several components like learning, memory, verbal functions, etc. Focusing on one dimension and leaving the others might lead us to wrong conclusions about overall cognitive functioning in old age and might also lead to forming stereotypes that do not reflect the real picture. Baltes (1993) however resolved the issue by distinguishing between 'fluid intelligence' and 'crystallised/ pragmatic intelligence'. Fluid intelligence is related to information processing like reasoning, memory and attention and crystallised/ pragmatic intelligence is related to accumulated knowledge over a period of time through education, employment and life experiences. Now within this context, studies have shown that fluid intelligence might decline with increasing age but pragmatic intelligence remains stable.

The notion of self and identity do get influenced with advancing age. The concept of self is made-up of notions concerned with answering the question that 'who am I?' This notion changes with ageing as people tend to acquire new statuses and roles with new set of responsibilities and status personalities. As individual is a part of the society, the self of the individual is shaped in context of the society. The formation of the self is contingent upon the images people have or the various stereotypes that are held associated with old age. The dynamism in the concept of self comes from the changing roles and aspirations with advancing age. The psychological perspective of ageing is concerned with such notions of self and identity formation.

8.1.3 Sociological or Social Perspective

The sociological or social perspective on ageing tries to locate ageing and old age within the larger collective consciousness of people. Ageing is located in the backdrop of social relationships and how these ensembles of social relations get altered with advancing age and changing roles and statuses is the task of a social scientist to understand them. The social perspective on ageing tries to understand the process at two levels of analysis viz. micro-scale and macro-scale. At the micro-scale ageing is understood as an individual experience within the context of a family or a small primary group. On the other hand at the macro-scale ageing is understood in the context of

gender, class, caste and ethnicity. These larger social divisions do have a profound influence on the process of ageing. It is within this context that it can be said that ageing is not a monolithic process but is heterogeneous and gets influenced by many other factors that are part of the social reality.

Society is not just the collection of individuals but it is an organisation that has enabling and constraining influences on its members. We all are bound by certain rules and norms of the society that give definite and predictable shape to our behavior. In this very particular sense the society can have enabling or constraining influence on the aged people. Ageing can be peaceful in some societies while it can be very stressful and debilitating in others.

Reflection

Societal Ageing: There is another facet to social gerontology and that is societal ageing. “This is concerned with the demographic, structural, cultural and economic transformation resultant from the increase in the number and proportion of ‘older’ people within society” (Victor 2005: 5). Societies might undergo a demographic transition where the population of older people increases. How does the society respond to such a scenario is dealt within the concept of ‘societal ageing.’

8.2 WHAT IS OLD AGE? THE INDIAN SCENARIO

It is really very difficult to define old age as it is society and culture specific. Moreover an individual’s perception about his or her age matters a lot as this defines his or her self concept at various stages in life. However, still for various administrative and procedural needs chronological old age is defined. The Central Statistics Office of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, in June 2011¹ came up with a Situation Analysis of the elderly in India. The report defined old age as follows: “Elderly or old age consists of ages nearing or surpassing the average life span of human beings. The boundary of old age cannot be defined exactly because it does not have the same meaning in all societies. Government of India adopted ‘National Policy on Older Persons’ in January, 1999. The policy defines ‘senior citizen’ or ‘elderly’ as a person who is of age 60 years or above.” As per the census of 2001, the elderly population accounted for 7.4% of the total population. This is projected to rise by 12.4% by the year 2026. This has important consequences for policy as with the rise of the elderly population, several policies might be required to look after them and their welfare. This is required more when we know that around 65% of the elderly have to depend on others for their day-to-day survival. A majority of the elderly are also economically dependent upon others. This economic dependence is more in the case of females. Society really needs to think about its elder population in a collective manner.

8.3 SOCIAL THEORIES OF AGEING

As explained in the introduction, ageing as a process is not divorced from the larger society. It is society that provides the necessary context for ageing as a process. In this sense, ageing becomes a social process. “Social theories of ageing explain the complexity and diversity of the ageing process in its social context (Phillips et al. 2010: 204).”

¹http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/elderly_in_india.pdf accessed on November 14, 2016

Bengtson et al. 1997 in their most important work on ageing have tried to review various social theories related to ageing and have reached the conclusion that all the social theories of ageing can be divided into three sets representing three generations of theories. The first generation or the early theories in gerontology developed between 1949 and 1969. Major theories within this generation include activity theory, disengagement theory and modernisation theory.

The second-generation theories developed between 1970 and 1985 included theories like exchange theory and age stratification theory. The third-generation theories are multi-disciplinary in nature and developed after 1985. Theories of this generation include feminist theories, critical gerontology and political economy. The logic behind dividing various social theories into three generations pertains to the historicity of their development. These theories developed in three different time periods and were influenced by dominant theoretical paradigms of those periods (Bengtson et al. 1997). However, the generational differentiation of theories is largely chronological in nature.

The earliest theme in the first-generation theory was to consider old age as a 'social problem'. Old age was seen as problematic for both the individual and society. "The essence of this approach is that it is concerned with the problematic and difficult aspects of ageing and the knowledge so generated is concerned with these areas, thus this approach will yield very little evidence as to the 'non-problematic' or 'normal' aspects of ageing. Indeed, the focus is upon the 'deviant' or difficulty aspects of ageing rather than to 'non-problematic'" (Victor 2005: 11). The paradigm of 'old age as a social problem' however generated many negative stereotypes related to ageing and old age.

Out of the above-mentioned theories, the disengagement theory, modernisation theory and the age stratification theory are influenced by the structural-functional paradigm. The structural-functional paradigm is the logical extension of the works of Durkheim in sociology and Radcliffe-Brown in social anthropology. It is largely based upon the 'organismic model' of society popularised by Herbert Spencer. Within this model society is seen as analogous to human organism. As in the case of human organism it is made up of different organs and these organs function in order to maintain the organism as a whole, similarly, the society is seen as an organism made up of different parts where different parts function to maintain the society as a whole. This paradigm is concerned with social order and equilibrium in the society. There is a definite arrangement of parts and these parts function in order to maintain the social order.

Based on the structural-functional paradigm the disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961) posits that, "independent of other factors such as poor health or poverty, ageing involves a gradual but inevitable withdrawal or disengagement from interaction between the individual and her/ his social context and that this process is mutually beneficial. Thus, disengagement would be seen as functional or useful, because it facilitates a smooth transfer of power from the old to the young. From this perspective, retirement is seen as a mechanism by which companies can predetermine levels of employee turnover, gives the individual a 'graceful' exit from the pressures of employment and creates employment opportunities for younger workers. Hence disengagement, as illustrated by retirement, is a mechanism for ensuring equilibrium within society and the transition of social power across generations (Victor 2005: 18).

The activity theory (Havighurst 1957), based upon the paradigm of equilibrium and social order is based upon the premise that social order can be maintained if people tend to retain or substitute their social and professional roles later in life. This is to say

that with advancing age people should engage themselves in other activities similar to or alternate to the activities and roles that they used to perform during their middle age. Activity theory is based upon two central assumptions:

1. People who are engaged in activity later in life are more satisfied than people who do not engage in an activity.
2. Loss of roles like in case of widowhood and retirement lead to dissatisfaction from life and compensation is needed through alternative roles enactments and role-playing.

The modernisation theory (Burgess 1960) of ageing holds that ageing in pre-industrial and pre-modern societies is stress-free and the process is different from the modern and industrial societies. It is based on the premise that modernisation leads to a very specific socio-economic condition that is not conducive for old age people and hence ageing in such societies is seen as a problem. It is argued that modern socio-economic conditions lead to a disintegration of extended families, improvement in medical technology, urbanisation and mass education. Due to improvements in medical technology more people tend to live longer lives and this leads to an increase in the population of the aged. Mass education and improvement in educational pedagogy and technology make their skills redundant in changing economic scenarios. Urbanisation led to the migration of youth to urban centers for work and hence disintegration of families begin. All these conditions lead to problems related to ageing.

Within the second-generation theories, the social exchange theory was proposed by Dowd (1975). This theory is based upon the cost-benefit model in an economy where old age is seen as less beneficial to the society as the capabilities and capacities of the individual reduce and thus the cost of maintaining them in the society increases. The solution to this problem within this theoretical premise lies in increasing the older people's resources.

The age stratification theory is based upon the premise that the chronological age in the society is responsible for allocating roles to the people belonging to a particular age-group. The roles are decided in a societal context and therefore it may vary from one society to the other. Riley (1971) argues that each age group (young, mid-life and old) can be analysed in terms of the roles that members of that group play within society and how these are valued (Victor 2005: 23). This theory argues that the normal age differentiation gets converted into a stratification system where younger people are preferred for more important roles than the older people and thus place them in a kind of hierarchy (Victor 2005).

The third-generation theories of ageing are influenced by the critical perspective in social sciences. Both, the political economy approach and the feminist approach are informed by the larger theoretical premise of critical gerontology. This theoretical perspective challenges the dominant worldviews and stereotypes that are oppressive in nature and tries to find an alternative viewpoint to look into the social realities at hand. The political economy and feminist perspectives see ageing as socially constructed and negotiated in the larger political and economic landscape. The dominant oppressive paradigms in society are implicit within this social construction. The feminist approach also shifts our focus from understanding old age as a homogeneous category to a heterogeneous category that is influenced by gender categories that are placed in the larger social structure of the society. The experience of old age according to feminists

is different for both males and females and that is largely due to their social positions in society. Besides this old age experiences are also influenced by other social categories of class, ethnicity, race, caste, etc.

8.4 ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF AGEING

The anthropological studies on ageing are varied in nature. As it is mentioned in the beginning of the unit that anthropology is more a bond between various subject matters and owing to this fact there are various dimensions from which ageing has been approached and studied in anthropology. It was the legendary American anthropologist, Franz Boas who defined the role and subject matter of anthropology by incorporating different dimensions while studying a particular culture. Such dimensions like the Biological/ Physical, Cultural, Archaeological and Linguistics later came to be known as four sub-fields or branches of anthropology. Ageing therefore can be approached from such different perspectives and view-points in anthropology.

The earliest perspective in anthropology was the evolutionary perspective. This perspective emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as the best possible explanation of human origin and variation. Gerontology when approached from this perspective tries to understand the evolution of life-span of various pre-historic populations. This is an important perspective to know and understand as to what is the trajectory of life-expectancy of various pre-historic groups. This can give important insights into certain environmental and technological conditions during the pre-historic times that led to changes in life-span of various groups. Studies have revealed that major change in life-expectancy occurred with the advent of agriculture and settled way of life when human beings were less exposed to the vagaries to nature. Evolutionary studies in gerontology have now shown the average life span of various populations since pre-historic times (Kanungo 1994; Bagga 2010).

<u>Population</u>	<u>Average Life-Span</u>
Neanderthal	29.4
Upper Palaeolithic	32.4
Mesolithic	31.5
Neolithic Anatolia	38.2

Source: Adopted with modifications from Bagga 2010

Another dimension relates to the difference in life-expectancy of males and females. It is a fact that females live longer than males and there are biological reasons for the same. “It has been proposed that superior life expectancies of female species may be due to secondary sexual characteristics like rate of metabolism, body composition, and masculine combatic behaviour of men that might operate to reduce their life span” (Bagga 2010: 4).

The biological anthropologists are not only concerned with evolutionary and differential aspects of ageing as a process but are also interested in knowing the causes of ageing. The two most prominent theories that explain the reason of ageing are Telomeres theory and the Free-Radical theory. The telomeres theory tries to explain the cause of ageing at the genetic level. On the other hand the free-radical theory tries to explain the

cause at the bio-chemical level. Another set of theories propose that ageing occurs due to accumulation of unrepaired damaged tissues in the body. Within the evolutionary paradigm, the cause of ageing is explained in terms of the response of the human body to the environment. The human body responds either by prioritizing tissue repair or reproduction. The difference in life expectancy of various species is dependent upon the priority accorded to either tissue repair or reproduction.

Within the domain of genetic studies in anthropology, ageing has been visualised at the genetic level. It has been established that there is a positive correlation between the longevity of parents and offspring. Data suggests that age at death of parents has an influence on the age at death of the offspring. Twin studies have shown that life-expectancy of monozygotic twins are more similar than the life expectancy of dizygotic twins (Kallmann and Jarvik 1959). Monozygotic twins are genetically similar to each other.

Anthropometric studies have also been performed in the context of ageing as a process. Such studies have documented changes in various body measurements. Several body measurements like stature, girth etc undergo a change with advancing age. With advancing age, a decrease in linear measurements is reported, for example, stature, sitting height, iliac height decreases with old age. However, the bi-gonial breadth and bi-iliac breadth increases.

8.5 LOCATING AGEING STUDIES IN THE DOMAIN OF SOCIAL-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The scope and subject matter of social-cultural anthropology has never been monolithic. With changing times and ideas there has been a paradigm shift in the larger questions and issues with which social anthropologists were concerned. This is largely referred to as agenda-hopping in anthropology. Social anthropology began with understanding the universal history of mankind within the theoretical premise of evolutionism. The larger goal of anthropologists in the mid-nineteenth century was to classify various societies as per their levels of development into an evolutionary sequence. Anthropologists like E.B. Tylor defined the agenda for anthropologists and said that the major job of anthropologists should be to classify societies from simple to complex. Anthropologists were concerned with the origin and evolution of religion, family, marriage and kinship. Besides this, all human societies were put into stages of savagery, barbarism or civilisation. Within this perspective ageing as a separate issue or dimension worthy of anthropological enquiry could not gain currency. Anthropologists were more occupied with understanding entire societies and cultures.

It was only in the twentieth century that anthropology shifted its focus from evolutionism and diffusionism to functionalism. Within the functional paradigm, Malinowski defined the agenda for anthropologists as in-depth fieldworkers and not just classifiers of data collected by untrained travellers and missionaries. Anthropology in this era shifted its focus to an in-depth study of a particular society by way of participant observation. It was for the first time that it was realised how should one study a society. The answer to this question was found in understanding society as an organism. Within this concept, a holistic study of society was attempted. As in the case of the human organism one can only understand it by studying its various organs and organ systems, likewise, a society can only be understood when taken as a whole. Different systems in a society become

its different organs like kinship system, religious system, economic system, etc. It was also within this paradigm that social relations became the focus of study as they were real and can be observed. Extending this logic to the study of old age, ageing studies within this paradigm do not form a separate dimension that needs to be studied but it can very well be understood by studying the social relations of old age people in different societies.

Old age within this paradigm can be located within larger institutional studies of say political institution. Studies within the functional and structural-functional paradigm documented systems like the age-set systems which were part of the larger political systems. Studies from East Africa have revealed that political organisations of certain tribes are based upon the age-set system. Age-set define political roles related to authority and decision making in such societies. "In most societies in which age-sets are important, every man is not only a member of a particular set, but also at any given time he occupies, with his age-mates, a particular grade. A typical series of grades (after childhood) is junior warrior-hood, senior warrior-hood, junior elder-hood, and senior elder-hood. Specific rules are associated with each grade; thus, warriors fight and defend the tribe from attack, elders settle disputes; make important decisions, and intercede with the ancestral ghosts" (Beattie 1964: 146). Old age in such tribes is a corporate group and thus ageing is not an individual process but the entire group jumps from one age-set to the other. This ensures a sense of collective identity among the people of older age-sets. The process of ageing, therefore, becomes collective as opposed to an individualistic process in some western societies.

Besides understanding ageing in terms of status and associated roles and as a social group with specific political roles to play, anthropologists have also tried to understand old age and ageing as a cultural phenomenon and tried to document the coming of age in societies and how culture influences such dimensions. One classical example, in this case, is Margaret Mead's study of Samoa islands. Although it was a study focusing the adolescent girls, in her book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead also deals with maturity and old age in one of the chapters. In this chapter, she is trying to understand what it means to grow older in a particular culture. She also compares the lives of old men with that of old women. The entire culture and personality school in anthropology deals with understanding the influence of culture on personality. The basic debate within this school of thought relates to the debate on nature versus nurture and this paradigm upheld the importance of nurture over nature. Cultural influences over personality are of prime importance and old age can be located within this paradigm. Mead argued that among the Samoan household, the age of an individual rather than relationship is an important criterion for exercising authority.

Although cultural evolutionism as a theoretical paradigm was abandoned in the beginning of twentieth century for being speculative in the light of lack of evidence to reconstruct the cultural capital of the past but its value remained in its diachronic nature (Fry 2009). Evolutionism was concerned with social and cultural change. In the context of ageing and studies on old age, understanding the dimension of change is of utmost importance. Since culture changes over a period of time, it is quite interesting to study the impact of such changes on the elderly. With culture being a variable old age can be analyzed across time. In contrast to the temporal dimension of old age having its logical roots in the diachronic approach functionalism was synchronic in nature (Fry 2009). It was not concerned as much with change as it was concerned with social order. Within this paradigm a spatial dimension to ageing was added. Owing to its rich fieldwork tradition,

experiences of elder people can be documented in a society and then it can be compared with other societies.

8.5.1 Cultural Conceptions of Age

The study of culture being central to anthropological enquiry, the cultural conception of old age and its usage becomes an important area of inquiry in anthropology (Fry 2009). The recognition of old age has a temporal dimension. It is with the time that a person accumulates years and becomes old. Time has been classified as being circular and absolute. In most of the simple societies time is circular as they do not subscribe to any calendar or timescale. Such a circular time is relative in nature and age is reckoned only in relation to some natural or social phenomenon. For example a person may say that I was born when there was a massive flood in the village. Such conceptions of time have important bearing on the notion of age and ageing. Such a life course is age-ambiguous life course as opposed to age-explicit life course where chronological age has greater influence on the social roles and responsibilities (Fry 2009). In the age-ambiguous life course ageing is more diffused. In the modern social context age-explicit life course enables the state to define roles and concessions according to the age. However, this may not match the individual or societal conceptions of old age (Fry 2009). For example, a government employee retires at the age of say 60 years because the state has such a mandate but that employee might not be a fit case of retirement since he/ she may be physically and mentally absolutely sound and fit to work. With the increase in complexity in the society and with the increasing population resources might get drained out and therefore the society attempts to force people shun those roles at a particular age which an individual could very well perform at that age (Fry 2009).

8.6 THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF AGEING: RITES DE PASSAGE AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

Ethnography is a method in anthropology where an anthropologist tends to describe and present a detailed account of the community which he/ she is studying. First-hand ethnographic accounts to understand a community in its totality began with Malinowski and his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders. Such ethnographic accounts focused on the institutions as a whole. Within the functional and the structural-functional tradition in anthropology different institutions were studied as forming a structure having parts that function to maintain the whole. Rites de passage form an important part of the institutional and social life of people in a community. These are certain ceremonies that mark the transformation of people from one status to another. Rites de passage is akin to various *sanskars* that are performed at various important occasions of life like birth, marriage, and death. By studying the rites de passage one can understand the kind of transformation in the status that occurs when one reaches a particular age. However, scholars have argued that since studying rites de passage involves the ethnographic study of the institutional form of transfer of rights and obligations, therefore a biographical approach is more suited to understand the transformations that an individual might undergo during his/ her life course. In this context Vidyarthi and Rai (1976) observe that “The different rituals or *sanskars* only signify that the individual is being entrusted with certain obligations and responsibilities for his own welfare as well as for the welfare of the community. Talking only about the *sanskars* and rituals would present an institutional account of the community and not the man. The traditional approach of

describing the life of an individual is based on the description of the rites de passage or the phases of life. . . . Redfield terms this approach as institutional. This description may give us a good account of the birth, marriage and death of an individual. Still, they give only isolated pictures about the rites or phases and not a complete picture of life as a whole. Considering these facts we feel that the approach of describing an individual's life must be such as to express the whole story of an individual in the frame of reference of his community where he grows up and not the turning points nor specific personal experiences alone. Thus, a general biographic account of an individual would be more helpful in understanding human careers as such. The social structure and the ecological system provide points of reference for the description of that career; the reason being that ecology determines the basic economy and elementary variables of a social structure, which again limit the arrangement of people in space, types of houses and family composition" (pp. 273-274). The biographical approach to understanding ageing is an embedded approach that tries to locate ageing within the larger social structure and the natural environment that forms the necessary matrix for an individual within which the entire social life takes place.

Using the ethnographic method, ageing studies have been carried out among tribes in India. Such studies try to understand that what it means to grow old in a particular culture. How old age is perceived by the people. The broader worldview regarding ageing and old age, guides the behaviour of people towards the elders. Such studies have tried to document the transformation in status of an individual that has achieved the status of a grandfather or grandmother. Such a transformation is usually accompanied by rites de passage of the newborn. It has been documented that elders in many tribes in India achieve the status of a *gaonbudha* who is considered as a repository of knowledge and wisdom. His/ her guidance is sought for many important works in the community and such people hold much clout in the political, and decision-making affairs of the village.

8.7 SUMMARY

Anthropology being a holistic discipline entails that for a holistic understanding of human beings various dimensions need to be taken into account that forms an integral part of human life. Gerontology can be defined as the study of ageing from three different perspectives- biological, psychological and social. Since gerontology is defined as the study of ageing from different perspectives, therefore it is a multidisciplinary subject that is informed by biological sciences, social sciences and psychology. The subject matter of anthropology and the multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach to gerontology together lead to an integration between the two. This makes anthropology and anthropologist best suited to undertake gerontological studies. Multi-dimensionality being at the core of anthropology makes it suitable for the study of ageing. An anthropologist would be interested in understanding the biological, social, cultural and archaeological dimensions of ageing.

Society and culture being two most important concepts in anthropology lead to understand ageing from two important vantage points:

1. One being that of social structure and
2. The other a cross-cultural comparison of ageing experiences and locating ageing and old age within the specific cultural experiences.

Besides this physical anthropologists study the physical dimensions of ageing that largely relate to bodily changes and genetic studies on ageing.

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Sample Questions

1. What do you understand by old age?
2. What is ageing, when does ageing start in human beings?
3. What are the various perspectives to understand ageing?
4. Explain the disengagement theory of ageing.
5. How physical anthropologists study ageing?
6. How ageing is understood by social-cultural anthropologists?
7. What is the cultural conception of age?
8. What is the biographical approach to ageing and how it is different from the rites de passage?
9. Describe various generations of social theories in ageing.



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